

Jesus' Object Lessons

Mark 11:12-26

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People learn in lots of different ways. Because of that, teachers also teach in different ways. Good teachers try to communicate their lessons using many different approaches, in the hopes that as many of their students grasp it as possible. One of my favorite teaching tools is the object lesson. An object lesson usually involves some kind of visual demonstration that illustrates a point. A good object lesson gains the attention of the students and pulls them in. As a result, they will never forget the demonstration, and hopefully will also remember the lesson that went along with it.

Jesus was a masterful teacher. We have seen Him teach people using parables, illustrations from what was happening around Him, modeling, and direct instruction. Today, we will see Jesus teach His disciples by using two object lessons. This passage is one of the most difficult to grasp and make sense of, but it is also a vivid that hopefully neither the disciples nor we will ever forget.

The Fig Tree

The first object lesson occurs as Jesus and the disciples were walking back to Jerusalem from Bethany. If you recall, Jesus had come into Jerusalem the day before (presumably Sunday) and experienced what is often called the Triumphal Entry. He went to the temple and looked around, then returned to Bethany for the night. Our story picks up on the next day (Monday), as Jesus and His disciples were going back to Jerusalem.

¹² The next morning as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. ¹³ He noticed a fig tree in full leaf a little way off, so he went over to see if he could find any figs. But there were only leaves because it was too early in the season for fruit. ¹⁴ Then Jesus said to the tree, "May no one ever eat your fruit again!" And the disciples heard him say it. (Mark 11:12-14, NLT)

To be honest, this seems like misdirected anger. Today we might explain Jesus' actions away by saying that He was "hangry". You may have experienced that before, when you are hungry and the slightest inconvenience can set you off, and you overreact. Many people read this account and assume that's what Jesus was doing as well. As a result, many have struggled with this passage, because it seems like Jesus is acting like a petulant child! Some have even gone so far as to question the biblical record, saying this event never really happened, or that it had been embellished in some way, or that the disciples misunderstood what happened. I think all of those explanations are wrong and the assumption that underlies them is also wrong.

People assume Jesus was acting out of frustration, but I don't think that's the case at all. He could have caused the tree to suddenly grow figs if He had so desired. This is the same guy who fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Satan correctly surmised that Jesus could turn stones to bread if He so desired. So to assume that

Jesus was simply acting in response to His physical hunger and lashed out in anger in a foolish way to approach this passage. Clearly, Jesus had a purpose in cursing the fig tree in front of the disciples. He was trying to teach them something. So what was it?

Pay attention to the details Mark gives us. He said that the tree was in full leaf. It wasn't the time for figs, but it is quite possible that this tree had bloomed and was in full leaf much earlier than most other fig trees. The point is that from a distance the fig tree appeared to be healthy, good, and beneficial. But when you took a closer look at it, it became apparent that all the leaves were just for show. It didn't have any fruit, so it was simply a shell of what a fig tree was supposed to be. Jesus' point was to say that a tree that doesn't bear fruit is worthless. Similarly, people who claim to be God's children but don't bear any fruit in their lives will be similarly condemned, just like the fig tree.

The cursing of the fig tree was an object lesson Jesus' disciples probably never forgot. At the end of our passage today, Jesus and the disciples passed the tree again the next morning, and the disciples took note of the tree.

¹⁹ That evening Jesus and the disciples left the city. ²⁰ The next morning as they passed by the fig tree he had cursed, the disciples noticed it had withered from the roots up. ²¹ Peter remembered what Jesus had said to the tree on the previous day and exclaimed, "Look, Rabbi! The fig tree you cursed has withered and died!" (Mark 11:19-21, NLT)

The tree that Jesus cursed had withered up and died from the roots. The tree that had once appeared so lush and beautiful was now barren and dead. I believe the point Jesus was making was that since the tree didn't bear fruit as it was supposed to, it was already dead, even though it appeared to be alive. By cursing the tree, He was making its outside match what was inside. Every time the disciples walked that path, they would see that same fig tree, and be reminded of the fact that Jesus taught that it doesn't really matter what you look like on the outside—what truly matters is what is on the inside. You can have all of the trappings of a good religious person, but if it doesn't bear fruit in the way you live your life, then you are dead, even if you advertise otherwise. It was a powerful object lesson the disciples surely never forgot.

The Temple

Jesus cursed the fig tree on His way to Jerusalem. When He arrived, He went to the temple, which was to be expected. What He did when He got to the temple, however, was unexpected.

¹⁵ When they arrived back in Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple and began to drive out the people buying and selling animals for sacrifices. He knocked over the tables of the money changers and the chairs of those selling doves, ¹⁶ and he stopped everyone from using the Temple as a marketplace. ¹⁷ He said to them, "The Scriptures declare, 'My Temple will be called a house of prayer for all nations,' but you have turned it into a den of thieves." ¹⁸ When the leading priests and teachers of religious law heard what Jesus had done, they began planning how to kill him. But they were afraid of him because the people were so amazed at his teaching. (Mark 11:15-18, NLT)

Jesus arrived at the temple, and it appears that He almost immediately began driving out the people selling sacrificial animals and knocked over the tables of the money changers (which would surely have created a tremendous noise). The NLT says that Jesus stopped everyone from using the temple as a marketplace, but other translations say Jesus stopped anyone from carrying through the temple. This seems like a shocking thing for Jesus to do and seems very out of character with the way we typically view Him. If we do not keep in mind that both the cursing of the fig tree and the clearing of the temple are object lessons, then we can easily get the wrong idea.

Just like with the fig tree, Jesus was not simply having a bad day and allowing little things that normally wouldn't bother Him to get under His skin. Jesus was not acting impulsively. Remember, Jesus had been to the temple the previous day and just looked around. This leads us to conclude that what Jesus did on this day was a measured, intentional act, designed to teach His disciples and anyone who would listen an important lesson.

So what was Jesus trying to teach by making a mess of the temple? Mark records the cursing of the fig tree, then the clearing of the temple, and then returns to the fig tree once more. I believe Mark does this to help us understand that these two object lessons are related. They are teaching the same lesson, but in different ways.

As you came into Jerusalem, you would see the temple standing high and gleaming in the sunlight. It was a magnificent structure that represented a magnificent God. The temple was supposed to be a place of worship and reverence to the Lord, but it had become all sorts of other things. The temple was like the fig tree in that it looked beautiful from afar, but once you inspected closely, you could see that things were not what they seemed. The fruit being borne by the temple was not what was supposed to come from worshiping God. Instead, there was greed, exclusion, and utter irreverence for the Lord.

The temple in Jesus' day was a massive complex. It was constructed with a series of concentric walls, each enclosing a different courtyard. The temple (with the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place) sat in the center, which was only accessible to priests. Next was the court of the Israelites, where only devout Israelite men could go. Surrounding that was the court of women, which was as far as Jewish women could go. And the outermost (and largest) courtyard was the court of the Gentiles, which was the only place that was accessible to Gentile worshipers of God. This is where Jesus was when He drove everyone out.

At Passover, everyone was supposed to offer animal sacrifices. These sacrifices were to be animals without blemish or spot—perfect animals, to represent the fact that sin can only be atoned for by a perfect sacrifice. According to the law, people were supposed to bring such an animal from their own flocks, but as you can imagine, an animal that started as spotless may not be so by the time they made the long journey to Jerusalem. As such, there were merchants who sold animals in Jerusalem specifically

for sacrifice. There were also people selling these animals inside the temple courts (in the court of the Gentiles). The people who sold these animals were related to the High Priest, Annas. These merchants had created a racket, jacking up the prices on animals sold inside the temple, while finding fault with any animal that had not been purchased inside the temple. They were gouging people coming to worship.

The same thing was happening with the money changers. When people came to Jerusalem for Passover, they were to pay the temple tax (as commanded by God), which helped provide for the temple and the priests who served there. The religious leaders would only accept their own currency for the payment of this tax, because foreign coins had false gods on them. The problem was that the money changers had a monopoly, so they found many ways to cheat people and charge excessive fees for converting their currency.

And all of this, the buying and selling of animals, people haggling over prices, and people changing money from one currency to another was happening in the court of the Gentiles! It would have been loud, smelly, and chaotic. This meant that it would have been a nearly impossible place for people to worship. In fairness, most people at this time did not view the court of the Gentiles as important, because they did not value Gentiles. Many scholars believe that people had even begun to cut through the temple when traveling from one side of the city to the other, using it as a shortcut. This was forbidden by their law, but they were doing it anyway. Many believe this was why Jesus stopped anyone from carrying anything through the temple (i.e., using it as a shortcut).

Jesus was condemning the fact that while everyone was happily convinced that they were serving the Lord, and may have even had great pride at the massive system they had built, they were actually far from Him! The Lord was concerned about the poor, the outcast, and the overlooked, while the religious leaders were using those same people to line their own pockets! Jesus declared that the temple was to be a place of prayer for all nations (including Gentiles), but instead they were using it to steal from the people. God was not being honored by any of this! The tree may have appeared green on the outside, but it was dead inside.

Jesus made a mess of the temple, not because He had a fit of rage, but because He was showing people that all the trappings of worship were worthless if it did not make any difference in how they lived. If their lives did not bear fruit that was pleasing to the Lord, then their religious activities were worthless!

While it is easy to condemn the religious leaders of Jesus' day for their evil actions, if that's all we do when we look at this passage, then we've missed the lesson entirely. Jesus' intent was that these object lessons would cause us to look carefully at our own lives and question whether we are bearing the fruit we should be. Are we allowing God's Word to guide us and change our actions, or are we simply going through the motions of worship? Jesus calls us to examine ourselves, lest we deceive ourselves.

So what should we be looking for? Paul lists some of the fruit that should be present in the lives of believers in Galatians 5.

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5:22-23, NLT)

If we go to church every Sunday, serve on every committee, and appear to all the world to be the model of a religious person, but we are not becoming more and more like this definition, then we are no different than the religious leaders of Jesus' day. If we claim to love the Lord, but we don't treat all people with kindness, gentleness, and respect, then we are demonstrating that our religion is a farce!

The same magnifying glass should be turned on our churches. Are we a place where people from all walks of life are welcomed? Are there people we would want to exclude from our fellowship? Are we concerned about the world outside these walls, or are we only concerned with ourselves? As pastor I had in college was fond of saying that if we aren't engaged in reaching people outside the church with the gospel message, then we have ceased to be a church; we have become a country club!

Jesus reminds us that our religion should not simply be something we do—it should be alive and vibrant and constantly changing us to become more like Jesus. If your religion only affects you on Sundays, then it is merely a façade—and will ultimately lead you to destruction.

Prayer

At the end of this passage, Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer. Jesus says similar things in other places, but we know He often repeated Himself to help His disciples retain and remember what He said. What He said is easy to misunderstand.

²² Then Jesus said to the disciples, "Have faith in God. ²³ I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'May you be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and it will happen. But you must really believe it will happen and have no doubt in your heart. ²⁴ I tell you, you can pray for anything, and if you believe that you've received it, it will be yours. ²⁵ But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too." (Mark 11:22-25, NLT)

On the surface, Jesus seems to be saying that if we just believe hard enough, then we can do amazing magic tricks. Sometimes people have looked at this passage and concluded that God will give them whatever they want if they just believe enough. But that's not consistent with what Jesus taught. Jesus was teaching us that when we pray in faith, and pray in accordance with God's will, nothing is impossible—even if it seems like it is. Jesus was telling us to turn to the Lord for help, asking Him to do what we cannot. He was not saying that God is like a genie who will grant our wishes if we just believe enough.

Somewhat surprisingly to us, Jesus connects effective prayer with the command to forgive. To have an open line of communication with the Lord, we must be doing what we can to align ourselves with His will. One of the things that often stands in the way of us being near to God is our unwillingness to forgive others. Jesus reminds us that those who have been forgiven must be willing to extend the same forgiveness to others.

Conclusion

While this is a passage that confuses many, Jesus gives us some clear teachings we should heed.

First, we should examine our own hearts. It's easy to look good on the outside. We can go through all the motions of worship without ever opening our hearts to the Lord. Don't allow your religion to become merely rituals you do—allow the Lord to change your heart. Work to cultivate the fruit He desires in your life. If we are truly worshiping Him, our lives will begin to show it—we will start looking more like Jesus.

Second, we should value people, not just what they can give us. The leaders in Jerusalem were using the people for their own benefit, not serving them and loving them. We can do the same thing. The Lord values each person. We should too. When we turn our backs on some people because we think they don't have anything to offer, we are making the same mistake as the religious leaders. The Lord hates the exploitation of people. It often starts small—so we should look for ways we might be using people rather than loving and respecting them.

Third, true worship is done on the Lord's terms. American churchgoers today have a variety of options available to them. As such, we sometimes become more like consumers than worshipers. We expect our churches to cater to us and to meet the needs we think are most important. When we allow our list of "wants" to become our primary motivation in worship, we are no longer worshiping the Lord. We should be coming to our churches asking what the Lord desires from us, not looking for what the Church can give us. Worship focuses on the Lord, not our desires.

Fourth, we must decide how we will respond to Jesus. The religious leaders didn't like what Jesus had to say, so they began putting into motion their plans to have Him killed. And we know that just a few days later they did exactly that. What Jesus had to say didn't sit right with them, so they tried to silence Him. We must be careful that we don't do the same. Jesus says many things that are uncomfortable, that challenge us, and that may push us in directions we don't really want to go. But He does so because He loves us and knows what is best. We must decide whether we will submit to and follow Him or ignore and try to silence Him.

Jesus used lots of different methods to get His point across. These object lessons we've looked at this morning are vivid reminders of what is at stake. How we respond to the Lord is of ultimate importance. We should heed His message and His warnings, because failing to do so will have drastic, and permanent consequences.

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